Arda Inhabited

Environmental Relationships in *The Lord of the Rings*

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To my parents, who taught me to love

Tolkien and the natural world

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The Professor and the Ecocritics

The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day!
　—J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

J. R. R. Tolkien was a person concerned with the preservation of the world around him, as indicated by his professed love for trees and growing things and the detailed attention given to setting in his creative works. Unfortunately, critics have often passed over the secondary world Tolkien so lovingly created in favor of other aspects of his work. A passing mention of his love of trees, for example, might be made, but the trees of Middle-earth have received relatively little critical attention. Often dismissed as mere setting, the descriptions of Middle-earth are relegated to positions of inferiority when they are considered as examples of the writer's verbosity, self-indulgence, or even braggadocio (if they are remarked upon at all). In fact, some see Middle-earth itself as an impediment to the narrative rather than an integral part of it. Christine Brooke-Rose claims that Tolkien's extremely detailed, realistic world "so weighs down the narrative that the reader can even experience" such descriptions as "actually interfering with the war-story, cheating it as it were."[1] Brooke-Rose is one of many critics for whom Middle-earth itself is not as important as the "war-story" or other narrative elements.

In contrast, Patrick Curry argues that the detailed attention given to the development of Middle-earth allows readers to approach it with "a startling sensation of primary reality."[2] Curry goes on to point out the purposeful craftsmanship that has gone into the creation of Middle-earth. So

thoroughly developed is this world that "it wouldn't be stretching a point to say that Middle-earth itself appears as a character in its own right."[3] Furthermore, he suggests that "the living personality and agency of this character [e.g., Middle-earth] are none the less for being non-human; in fact, that is just what allows for a sense of ancient myth, with its feeling of a time when the Earth itself was alive."[4] Curry argues that Middle-earth has inherent value.

Curry's brief treatment of Middle-earth is just one among recent publications that indicate a sincere consideration of the importance of environment in *The Lord of the Rings*. Books such as *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien* or *Plants of Middle-earth: Botany and Sub-Creation*, to name just two, are among the few that look closely at Middle-earth itself. Such considerations yield a greater appreciation for the meticulous craftsmanship of J. R. R. Tolkien, and there is room for much more scholarly consideration of Tolkien's world. In his day, Tolkien suggested the critics not approach literature (specifically, *Beowulf*) as though meaning had to be revealed or uncovered. He advocated looking at what the text directly exposed—in that case, the monsters. As critics, we can attempt to take Tolkien at his word by applying that same standard to his writing. What can we see if we stop looking for what is hidden in the text and look instead at what the text exposes? What can we see when we focus less on what else the text points to and focus instead on the world laid explicitly before us? With such questions in mind, this book explores how characters interact with elements of the environment in *The Lord of the Rings*, suggesting that this interaction reflects the moral paradigm within the text. Moreover, the portrayal of interconnectedness related to that specific moral code offers a corrective to some of the unfortunate limitations of ecocriticism.

In looking closely at the connection between people and place, I am drawing on the critical framework provided by ecocriticism. This branch of literary theory is still developing, and varies somewhat from critic to critic, but one of its main projects is to highlight the importance of place. The lens it provides allows me to look closely at elements of place that are important but often overlooked. While the attitudes and assumptions of ecocriticism in general do not completely match Tolkien's own, ecocriticism can still add to an understanding of his work, and Tolkien's own attitudes can add something to ecocriticism. Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans suggest something similar in their work mentioned above. Their admirable study considers the whole of Tolkien's *legend-*

arium with regard to real-life environmental practice. My study shares their approach, but I intend to focus primarily on *The Lord of the Rings* and the power relationships that result from or are indicated by the way characters interact with their environments.

Because this work draws heavily on ecocriticism, it is worthwhile to begin with a brief overview of some pertinent positions within that field. There are many different ways to approach the environment, and therefore many different ways to approach the combination of environment and literature. "The widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism," states Greg Garrard, "is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself."[5] Ecocriticism, like other critical approaches, attempts to consider and broaden the understanding of who or what has value. Some critics will claim that "ecocriticism has no central, dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus," suggesting instead that whatever is produced by ecocritics is de facto ecocriticism.[6] In fact, this particular field is a very welcoming one in some ways, reveling in a wide range of approaches. Glen Love rejoices that:

> The present state of this movement, for which the blanket term *ecocriticism* has come to be accepted, is one of ferment and experimentation. What is emerging is a multiplicity of approaches and subjects, including—under the big tent of environmental literature—nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, interdisciplinarity, eco-theory, the expansion of the canon to include previously unheard voices, and the reinterpretation of canonical works from the past.[7]

While ecocriticism is more than merely a study of setting, a "mere" study of setting would be welcomed, as would many other considerations. Ecocriticism takes a step back and looks at what surrounds itself. This willingness to include many different approaches to environment might lead its detractors to claim that there is no such thing, really, as ecocriticism. Despite this claim, however, there are some basic attitudes that are widely shared.

Most people concerned with this theory do share a concern for the nonhuman. It is worth noting that when these critics refer to "the nonhuman," they use that term in an almost exclusively materialist sense.

Ecocriticism advocates the importance of the physical environment in literary studies and as a result tends to overlook a position that includes metaphysical concerns, spirituality, or a concern with the Divine as similarly "nonhuman." In Tolkien's approach, however, the "nonhuman" world includes not only vegetation, animal life, and geology, but the implication of spiritual influences as well. Tolkien's acceptance of the presence of spiritual life in the nonhuman category offers a helpful addition to reading texts from an ecocritical perspective.

It may seem simplistic to say people concerned with ecocriticism focus on the depiction of the "natural" in texts, but this definition is more complicated than it may first appear. The way the environment is treated in a text illuminates how the environment is culturally received and constructed. In treating the natural world as a fit topic of academic study, these critics seek to unbalance a power structure of anthropocentrism in favor of a community of living things (including, for example, rocks, which are not always considered living) that are equally valued, though not equivalent. The academic study of environment teaches students yet another method of encoding and decoding. According to William Howarth: "Texts do reflect how a civilization regards its natural heritage. . . . Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity."[8] Learning to translate these messages, or even to acknowledge that such messages may exist, is a primary focus of ecocriticism.

The silence of nature in Western culture is particularly disturbing to many critics. A voiceless world is a world without value because "for human societies of all kinds, moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another."[9] If the world does not speak to us, then we are not obligated to treat it morally. Unfortunately, "nature *is* silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative."[10] In order for previously marginalized groups to attain validity, the essential personhood of the members of these groups first had to be recognized on some level. Ecocriticism seeks to remove this step, and, like other theories, suggests that a new vocabulary may aid such action: "If the domination of nature with all its social anxieties rests upon this void [i.e., the perceived silence of the natural world], then we must contemplate not only learning a new ethics, but

a new language free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern, post-humanist perspective. In short, we require the language of ecological humility."[11]

Developing such a language requires not only that we interrogate pre-existing terms that indicate oppressive power structures, but also that we acknowledge languages beyond English, beyond French, or beyond any spoken by human beings. Some literal-minded thinkers out there may feel that of course the natural world is silent because it literally has no speech. Such criticisms are facile and superficial, and miss the point entirely. To listen to the environment is, practically speaking, to observe its reaction to human actions, and to understand its rhythms, practices, and habits. It is to recognize, in our minds, our lives, and our policy making, that there is life out there beyond our own, and that we are connected to it. It is, as Wendell Berry says, to "be aware of it as one is aware of one's body," and to treat it with similar respect.[12] In fact, Berry perhaps best expresses the attitude of ecological humility idealized by ecocritics and exemplified by Tolkien's heroes. Berry says

> [T]he sense . . . came suddenly to me then that the world is blessed beyond my understanding, more abundantly than I will ever know. . . . Though as a man I inherit great evils and the possibility of great loss and suffering, I know that my life is blessed and graced by the yearly flowering of the bluebells. How perfect they are! In their presence I am humble and joyful. If I were given all the learning and all the methods of my race I could not make one of them, or even imagine one. . . . It is the privilege and the labor of the apprentice of creation to come with his imagination into the unimaginable, and with his speech into the unspeakable.[13]

Approaching the environment around us with a feeling of appreciation and blessedness seems to be the requirement for hearing its voice. Berry's comments on the privilege of giving speech to the unspeakable (or voiceless) are especially pertinent to a discussion of Tolkienian environmentalism.

Critics, then, are called to learn to interpret the language of the landscape in which they reside. Manes preaches that "in addition to human language, there is also the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls—a world of autonomous speakers whose intents (especially for hunter-gatherer peoples) one ignores at one's peril."[14] There may well be critics who take such a call to heart and in dead earnest

set down their Wordsworth and begin studying the dances of bees. While this can be productive, it may be more culturally relevant to explore how we understand, decode, and encode the nonhuman elements of our world already. The problems of understanding and representing the communication methods of the nonhuman world are not new. Giving these problems critical attention, however, is a relatively recent development. Just as other hierarchies have been toppled, or at least attacked, in recent theoretical developments, ecocriticism seeks to dethrone the primacy of human speech and to interrogate what voice we have ascribed to the nonhuman world, and by what authority.

Part of developing a "language of ecological humility" requires that we (Westerners, humans, critics) reconsider what the word "natural" means. This term is frequently used in ecocriticism to refer to something that has not been made by people (such as the Grand Canyon) or to something that is nonhuman and organic (for instance, a carrot). Using the word "natural" in this way reflects a certain attitude that perceives the human world and humans themselves as something *un*natural. Frederick Turner notes that: "Most of us, asked what nature is, would probably make a vague gesture toward the nearest patch of green vegetation and say, to begin with, something like, 'Well, it's what's out there, not what's in here.' A little prompting would elicit any number of other imaginary characteristics; one can go out into nature, but even when one is in it, it is still 'out there.'"[15] Though ecocriticism seeks to elide this opposition by focusing on connections, it remains complicit in the preservation of the difference between humans and their environments. Without this difference, the project of ecocriticism becomes irrelevant.

One way in which this tension is mitigated is through ecocriticism's paradigm of interconnectedness. "The really subversive element in Ecology," claims Neil Evernden, "rests not on any of its more sophisticated concepts, but upon its basic premise: inter-relatedness. . . . There are no discrete entities."[16] This paradigm further develops previous postmodern ideas of the Self and undermines all hierarchies. Evernden goes on to explain that "ecology begins as a normal, reductionist science, but to its own surprise it winds up denying the subject-object relationship upon which science rests."[17] The academic project that unites ecology and literature asks the critic to consider ways of connecting to the environment that do not require the objectification of the living world around us.

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome is particularly relevant to this approach. In their nonhierarchical model, they propose the struc-

ture of a rhizome as a corrective to hierarchies, represented by them in the form of a tree. A tree has many branches and many roots, but all are pulled together in the trunk. A tree is a symbol of totalization and a homogeneous entity. Rhizomes, on the other hand, grow horizontally and, while connected, differ depending on the influences of their contexts. "The rhizome connects any point to any other point," say Deleuze and Guattari, "and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature."[18] There is no position of privilege in a rhizomatic model. "Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions," the rhizome consists of lines of connection among otherwise disparate elements.[19] It is not static, having "no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*."[20] The rhizome is characterized by "all manner of 'becomings.'"[21]

The nonhierarchical rhizomatic model is highly relevant to the overall aims of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism requires a reevaluation of both what "natural" is and what "human" is, but also a reconsideration of what a "Self" is. Evernden claims "There is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place."[22] The center in a rhizomatic model is wherever one happens to be standing, shifting depending on one's context. Just as Evernden claims that there is only individual-in-context, Deleuze and Guattari argue that meaning occurs only within context, and it is only through context that something can be understood.

Deleuze and Guattari's approach coincides well with the focus of ecocriticism further in that it also promotes the deferral of definition. "We will never ask what a book means," they say. "We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge."[23] The rhizomatic model they favor is about interconnectedness, like so much ecocriticism, even that which claims to have nothing to do with postmodernism. As previously mentioned, later chapters will further explore the idea of interconnection as it relates to moral judgment. How can one say what is good or bad in a system that rests on contextual relativity? *The Lord of the Rings* answers this by demonstrating a paradigm in which morality is indicated and shaped by connection to environment.

Another way to think about how ecocriticism undermines hierarchies is by considering how it favors a paradigm that mirrors the food web. In

the food web, all species are dependent upon each other's existence for sustenance. The predator is stronger than its prey, certainly, but not more important or more essential. "All of nature has utility, all is important," claims Evernden.[24] Ecocriticism seeks to topple Man as Master and instead show that people and pansies depend upon each other. Evernden describes various attitudes of centering in the following manner:

> The whole world is simply fodder and feces to the consumer, in sharp contrast to the man who is in an environment in which he belongs and is of necessity a part. The tourist can grasp only the superficialities of a landscape, whereas a resident reacts to what has occurred. He sees a landscape not only as a collection of physical forms, but as the evidence of what has occurred there. To the tourist, the landscape is merely a façade, but to the resident it is "the outcome of how it got there and the outside of what goes on inside." The resident is, in short, a part of the place.[25]

Ecological studies seek to prove that every human is (or should be) a resident and not merely a tourist. The duty of the critic is to refuse to remain a tourist or a mere consumer and to reclaim residency. Rather than strip-mining texts for one's own academic production, the resident critic tends a text, harvesting what is ripe and preparing the soil for future growth.

Though ecocriticism favors nonhierarchical relationships, Tolkien's own position is somewhat more difficult to ascertain. As I argue in this work, the heroes in Tolkien's work relate to their environments in ways that are nonhierarchical. However, Tolkien does seem to advocate status and position between individuals. Marjorie Burns argues that "knowing your place" is essential to happy living in Tolkien's work.[26] Similarly, Charles Coulombe suggests that the hierarchy Tolkien favors is informed by his Catholicism, and that "traditional Catholic culture has been hierarchical."[27] However, the hierarchies favored in Tolkien are ones that do not exploit those subject to them. For instance, it may well be that Hobbits are stewards over the Shire, and therefore are in a sense higher in the hierarchy. Furthermore, within Hobbit culture, some Hobbits (Frodo, Merry, Pippin) have a greater social status than others (Sam, the Gaffer, Ted Sandyman), so there is a kind of hierarchy operating within the community. When it comes to the Hobbits' relationship with their place, though, any sense of the Hobbits exercising privilege over the land is undermined by the privilege the land exercises over the Hobbits. The hierarchy is undone. This is even more obvious with the Elves and the Ents. So yes, there is

a kind of hierarchy at work in Tolkien, but hierarchies involving inter-species domination are either undone or a mark of evil.

In spite of the connection between previous postmodern theories and the development of ecocriticism, it is not uncommon for environmental critics to seek to distance the two. One critic claims that "the great blind spot of postmodernism is its dismissal of nature, and especially human nature."[28] Love finds postmodern theory inescapably arrogant in its insistence on what he feels is an inappropriate focus. While postmodernism is "blind" to human nature, it still spends too much energy discussing an exclusively human world. He explains that: "This [postmodern theory] is a world of human solipsism, denied by the common sense that we live out in our everyday actions and observations. It is denied as well by a widely accepted scientific understanding of our human evolution and of the history of the cosmos and the earth, the real world, which existed long before the presence of humans, and which goes on and will continue to go on, trees continuing to crash to the forest floor even if no human auditors are left on the scene."[29] Unfortunately, Love ignores the inherently constructed nature of "scientific understanding" and "our everyday observations." He does gesture toward acknowledging that people do shape their environments, but he does not allow this acknowledgment to distract him from his main point: lived experience is enough of a guarantor to support one's conclusions based on observation.[30]

Other critics highlight the tension between construction and observation as well. Garrard considers that while a constructivist approach is "a powerful tool for cultural analysis," this tool suggests that "'nature' is only ever a cover for the interests of some social group."[31] He admits the tension and explains that "the challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which 'nature' is always in some ways culturally constructed and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse."[32] As with other critical approaches, the most productive ecocriticism favors a both/and approach to the tension between constructivism and observation.

Even when critics allow themselves to work within the space created by these tensions, some feel that postmodernism and ecocriticism just vary fundamentally in their aims. Sueellen Campbell points to the fact that postmodernism and ecocriticism undermine traditional hierarchies or displace the position of the human being. However, their aims in doing so are quite different. She claims that: "theory sees everything as textuality, as networks of signifying systems of all kinds. While both theory